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Lumen Siccum - 1868

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We want a way of looking at things themselves direct, and not through the mist of centuries of institutions. . . . We must get at the result by simple honesty and single purpose; by a casting off of timidity and time-serving, and being bold for truth; by ourselves going back, in every social and religious question, past the mere runnel-pipes of sect and precedent, up to the fountain-heads in God's everlasting hills.—DEAN ALFORD.

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LUMEN SICCUM:

AN ESSAY ON THE EXERCISE OF THE
INTELLECT IN MATTERS OF
RELIGIOUS BELIEF.



ADDRESSED TO MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY OF
FRIENDS.

LONDON: F. BOWYER KITTO.
MANCHESTER: HALE & ROWORTH.
1868.

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February 3, 1942



PREFACE.

A SHORT essay should not need a long preface: it is desirable, however, that the writer should briefly explain the reasons which have induced him to print the following pages: the essay was originally written for a very limited audience composed of Members of the Society of Friends, but it seems to him exceedingly important that the views which it advocates should be more generally examined and understood by his fellow-members in that religious body. There is nothing *new* in the essay,—nothing more than must be perfectly familiar to all who are conversant with the current of modern thought in science and literature—but there is in our Society a very wide-spread disinclination to accord a patient hearing, much less a careful examination, to arguments which threaten to undermine long-cherished beliefs and traditions, and it is probable

that the relation in which such beliefs stand to modern knowledge has received but little attention amongst us. Entertaining great respect for the feelings of those who still cling with affectionate tenacity to beliefs which long usage has taught them to regard as sacred and essential, the writer none the less believes that very much error is mixed up with the articles of faith which most of us have been taught to look upon as orthodox. This state of things is fraught at the present time with peculiar danger, and it will be cause of rejoicing if any should be induced by what is here written to examine more closely the grounds upon which many commonly received doctrines rest.

It is perhaps desirable to state that the phrase adopted as the title, is borrowed from Lord Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, Book I, where it occurs as follows:—"For then knowledge is no more *Lumen siccum*, whereof Heraclitus the profound said, *Lumen siccum optima anima*: but it becometh *Lumen madidum*, or *maceratum*, being steeped and infused in the humours of the affections."

Third Month, 1868.



LUMEN SICCUM.

THE thirst for knowledge is one of the purest and noblest instincts with which humanity is endowed; it is perhaps the attribute which most unmistakeably separates the mind of man from that of brutes. The cultivation of the mind and the development of its powers,—not with any directly utilitarian end, but for the sake of rendering it as far as possible a perfect instrument of study and research—is the highest aim of rational education. And the sphere open to mental exercise, is as wide as the universe itself; it embraces the world of spirit and the world of matter; nothing which is possible to it is unlawful: the recognized round of human knowledge is so only by conquest, and we cannot tell what undiscovered realms yet await the explorer's eye. The newly-created science of comparative philology, for example, promises to throw much light on the early history and derivation

of the various races of mankind, while the recently awakened interest in the relics of primeval man, and the patient investigation of all subjects likely to instruct us respecting his origin and early condition, can scarcely fail in the end to give us some certain knowledge of these most interesting questions. And as to modern Biblical criticism, however much some may deprecate its supposed results, it cannot be denied that much real knowledge has been gained, and that a largely increased interest has thus accrued to the study of the book itself. In a word there is no possible subject of thought or study, concerning which it can reasonably be said—Stand aside for this is holy ground. The bounds imposed by the Creator in the constitution of the human mind form the only legitimate and indefeasible confines of thought, and any subject which is cognizable by the mind is a lawful one for the exercise of its powers.

We need not here speak of the spirit in which these inquiries should be conducted, but the following words of the Duke of Argyll, on this point, are very terse and instructive. "It is not on one subject of inquiry, but in all, that we come speedily to questions which cannot be answered. In none should we be jealous of research. In all we must be jealous of presumption. In all should reason be warned to keep within the limit of her powers. From none should reason be warned away. Men who denounce any particular

field of thought are always to be suspected. The presumption is that valuable things which these men do not like, are to be found there. * * * We never can certainly know what is accessible to reason, until the way of access has been tried. In the highest interests of truth, we must resist any and every interdict against research. The philosophy which assumes to issue such an interdict must have reason to fear inquiry." It must be remembered that some of the most brilliant successes of science have been achieved in regions of investigation, which were at one time proscribed as being beyond the scope of legitimate inquiry.

And now that science is becoming so widely popularized, and its study in colleges and schools is taking so strong a hold on men's minds, it is impossible that theological dogmas or religious beliefs should be accepted, as they were wont to be, in mere deference to authority. It is beginning to be felt that statements pertaining to theology and religion must be capable of verification in the same way as any other truths, that religion and theology are indeed themselves within the range of accurate thought, that their domains may be freely traversed by truth-seekers and men of science, and that the light that shines upon them, though it be religious, needs not to be dim.

We are mostly ready enough to honour those whose lives are spent in the investigation of matters

connected with physical science; if they fall into error, we recognize this as only the natural, and often the inevitable, consequence of the limitation of our human mind, the imperfection of our knowledge, and of our means of investigation. But it is to be feared that in matters which are at all of a religious cast, or which are liable to associate themselves in our minds with such ideas, more especially in matters of purely theological bearing, we are not by any means so charitable. And yet there is much reason why we should be even more so. The root of our intolerance is probably this,—we have a notion that we are in possession of a book which presents us with an absolutely perfect scheme of religion, and that from the dicta of this book there is no appeal. I have no desire to dispute the perfection of the Christian Religion. I believe it to be a revelation beyond which it is impossible for man to go; but that it has received its fullest and most spiritual interpretation, I utterly disbelieve. Not even the religious society to which we have the privilege to belong,—a society which beyond most others has insisted upon the spirituality and simplicity of the Gospel dispensation—has adequately appreciated the extreme simplicity of Christ's theology.

But however this may be, when we consider the widely different expositions of Christ's teachings which have been given forth by men whose honesty

and depth of religious feeling cannot be doubted, when we look at the development of religion,—irregular and spasmodic perhaps, but still in its general course constantly tending upwards out of the grosser extrinsic forms into its more spiritual manifestations—when we consider this gradual progress of the human mind from darkness to light, it is impossible for any candid observer to suppose that we have yet grasped the whole truth as regards our relation to God, that there is no further need for thought or for investigation in this direction, or that we are likely to promote the good of the world and the interests of truth, by discouraging study of this kind.

It is held by many that the dogmas of theology are beyond the legitimate range of our reasoning faculties, and are to be accepted or rejected according as we suppose them to harmonize or conflict with the dicta of scripture or other constituted authority. But although there are propositions which the religious mind will always be inclined to accept as matters of faith without requiring absolute demonstration of their truth, it is obvious that the number of these must be exceedingly restricted, and will include matters only of purely spiritual import. Faith is the substance *of things hoped for*, the evidence of things *not seen*; it may lead us to confide in the power of God to work miracles,—it can never convince us of the truth of any particular *account* of a

miracle, nor of the fact that God has ever judged it expedient to exert that power. In a word no statement of fact whether of history or science can be taken simply upon faith. Whenever such statements occur they must stand or fall on far other ground than this.

Yet the 'orthodox' spirit is excessively intolerant of those who attempt to reduce these principles to practice. So long, indeed, as a man brings his critical faculties to bear in a strictly orthodox manner, and his work results in the substantiation of "undesigned coincidences," or "harmonies of the Gospels," the religious world looks on approvingly and says he could not devote his mental powers to a nobler purpose; but when he gets a little further and instead of "undesigned coincidences," begins to find unmistakeable discrepancies, begins to find, in fact, that the writers of the sacred narrative, though good and inspired men, were yet not so inspired as to render them infallible—then indeed the case is quite altered, then he is called heretic or infidel, pointed out as a man who has gone hopelessly astray, held up as a religious scarecrow—a pitiable instance of what we shall come to if we allow reason to exert any influence on our faith.

The abolition of auricular confession and other corruptions of the Romish Church, were comparatively unimportant parts of the Protestant Reformation.

The one priceless testimony which it upheld was that of the absolute freedom of conscience and of thought. The freedom then achieved has many a time suffered sad eclipse. There was full as much need of a second reformation when George Fox arose and again successfully fought the battle of freedom of conscience, for which he was thought little better than an infidel by many in his day. There is scarcely less need of a similar testimony now, but it is to be feared that in the conflict between the letter and the spirit which now agitates Christendom, and which must ere long convulse it, our Society may be found to have faced about, and to be looking with approval on those who uphold the "weak and beggarly elements" of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, and many other dogmas which associate themselves with that belief.

What I mainly wish to urge in this brief essay is the paramount duty of welcoming and thankfully accepting light from whatever quarter it may fall. Truth is no more truth, error is none the less error, because it may be contained in the best of books. Our reasoning faculties are given us to use and not to lay up in a napkin; the active use of them is not only permissible, it is an *imperative duty*. It is no part of our "reasonable service," no characteristic of a child-like faith, to accept time-honoured dogmas merely from habit, and to refuse to look at the light which may show them to be errors. Each age has

privileges and responsibilities greater than the preceding one. The special gift of God to *us* is Science; it has already dissipated many errors which were at one time essentially bound up with religious creeds,—there are many left which must ere long disperse like clouds before the rising sun. Let us hope that our hands may not be stretched out to stay the good work or to discourage those who are busy therein.

There are doubtless many in our Society who, like myself, accept unreservedly the teachings of modern science as to “continuity” and the “reign of law;” and the great importance of the relation of these doctrines to the spiritual life will be a sufficient excuse for my here venturing to say a few words respecting them. The apparent difficulty of harmonizing the idea of Prayer with that of universal Law, is, doubtless, a very serious stumbling-block to many reflective, religious minds. Yet there is, (as I think) no reason for any misgiving in the matter. Nor is there any need to adopt the immoral and mischievous supposition of those who believe that prayer is useful, but only as a discipline by which the moral being may be strengthened,—that any special petitions are not, and cannot in the nature of things be, answered: such a doctrine must be destructive of all sincerity, for how can we put up the “prayer of faith” to a Being who we believe will steadfastly refuse to grant our requests? We are very ignorant respecting the laws of our

spiritual being, but it is perfectly reasonable to believe that spiritual life can no otherwise be maintained and invigorated than by communion with, and prayer to, the Father of Spirits, nor is there any difficulty in believing that the benefits we thus receive, we receive according to laws of God's appointing: to believe otherwise, indeed, would be to accuse God himself of capriciousness and partiality.*

It may perhaps be urged that the critical system is altogether a destructive one, that it undermines our present faith without giving us any hold upon another. Language as strong as this is indeed held by our opponents. But can it be for a moment believed by any reflecting mind, that the Christian's faith is dependant upon his literal acceptance, for instance, of the Mosaic histories, or of the prophetic character of the Book of Daniel? It would be easy to extend the same remark to other books of the Bible. Is there anything in such stories—dramatic and beautiful though they may be—as those of Ruth and Esther, to warrant our ascribing them to the direct inspiration of the Almighty? Are they one whit more divine in their teaching than Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur*, or Wordsworth's *Churchoyard among the Mountains*? The internal evidence, surely, would lead us to

* See also on this subject, an admirable paper by Frederic Seebohm, "On the Christian Hypothesis and the Method of its Verification," in the *Fortnightly Review* for February, 1868.

regard the latter as being more unmistakeably of Divine origin. And it is no disparagement to the surpassing claims of the Bible as the most holy of books, if we admit that the Divine element is, in its pages, largely mingled with the merely Human. Ought we not then to accept with thankfulness the blessing of living in a day when we can so much more readily comprehend the spirituality of Christ's doctrine, apart from the grosser elements with which it has so long been mixed up? Or are we still, in deference to the mischievous dogma of one unerring and infallible Book, to believe that He who is *Love*, "whose tender mercies are over all his works," enunciated the inhuman Mosaic laws* respecting slavery,—that He who is "long-suffering and plenteous in mercy and truth," "slow to anger and of great mercy," could ever for the indiscretion of one man in numbering his people, have let loose the Angel of Pestilence through all the coasts of Israel, until "there died of the people seventy thousand men," while the real offender went scathless? "Lo *I* have sinned and *I* have done wickedly, but *these sheep* what have *they* done?"

It is not merely anachronism in matters of chronology, not errors of numeration only, not even the blindest ignorance respecting matters of science, in

* I here refer only to certain exceptional laws; not, by any means, to the Mosaic code as a whole.

presence of which we should feel compelled to abandon the notion of the infallibility of the sacred volume ; far more than all these, it is the utter revulsion of the whole moral being from statements such as this, the feeling that the whole narrative is in hopeless antagonism to all that we know for ourselves, or that the Bible elsewhere tells us, of the attributes of God.

The author of *Ecce Homo* says—"We ought to be just as tolerant of an imperfect creed as we are of an imperfect practice. Everything which can be urged in excuse for the latter may also be pleaded for the former. If the way to Christian action is beset by corrupt habits and misleading passions, the path to Christian truth is overgrown with prejudices and strewn with fallen theories and rotting systems which hide it from our view. It is quite as hard to think rightly as it is to act rightly, or even to feel rightly. And as all allow that an error is a less culpable thing than a crime or a vicious passion, it is monstrous that it should be more severely punished ; it is monstrous that Christ, who was called the friend of publicans and sinners, should be represented as the pitiless enemy of bewildered seekers of truth. How could men have been guilty of such an inconsistency? By speaking of what they do not understand. Men in general do not understand or appreciate the difficulty of finding truth. All men must act, and

therefore all men learn in some degree how difficult it is to act rightly. The consequence is that all men can make excuse for those who fail to act rightly. But all men are not compelled to make an independent search for truth, and those who voluntarily undertake to do so are always few. They ought, indeed, to find pity and charity when they fail, for their undertaking is full of hazard, and in the course of it they are too apt to leave friends and companions behind them, and when they succeed they bring back glorious spoils for those who remained at home criticizing them. But they cannot expect such charity, for the hazards and difficulties of the undertaking are known to themselves alone. To the world at large it seems quite easy to find truth and inexcusable to miss it. And no wonder! For by finding truth they mean only learning by rote the maxims current around them."*

This is profoundly true. No doubt most of us look upon religious tests as relics of intolerance and ignorance, and are ready to condemn those who still endeavour to hold us in their trammels. But does it ever occur to us to enquire of our own minds how many articles we have ourselves, perhaps almost unwittingly, laid down, to which we require the assent of our fellow-men before we will acknowledge them as members of the Church universal? Are we help-

* *Ecce Homo*, Sixth Edition, p. 72.

ing to lay burdens upon men's consciences too grievous for them to bear, "teaching for doctrines the commandments of men," or are we ready, not in a spirit of mere presumptuous tolerance, but with an all embracing charity, to adopt the simple requirement, "He that cometh unto God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him?"

Whatever penalties man in his pride and intolerance may attach to heterodoxy, it is monstrous to suppose that *God* will bring us into condemnation for any unwillful misconception of intellectual or spiritual truth. He has endowed us with faculties confessedly finite and imperfect, but such as they are—whether the one talent or the ten—we are distinctly enjoined by Christ himself to *use* them; and if in the honest exercise of these gifts we fall into error, as sometimes we must, man indeed may punish us, but God "knoweth our frame and remembereth that we are dust." To say that the exercise of the intellect on religious matters is wrong, because God has given us in the Scriptures a revelation which would preserve us from error, is to maintain a proposition which refutes itself, for the most incompatible doctrines have been educed from Scripture by men who, as we must believe, were earnest and devout seekers after truth; besides which the careful study of the Bible is a pursuit which in itself makes considerable demands on

the intellect, and which in its most comprehensive methods can be carried out but by few.

The tone of such essays as that on the "Divine Authority of Holy Scripture," in a recent number of the *Friends' Examiner*, is to me extremely painful, the writer not only insisting on the unquestioning acceptance of everything in the Bible, (specially naming the Pentateuch and the Apocalypse) but openly attributing enmity against it to those who think differently. There is, however, a large and constantly increasing number of thoughtful people whom language of this kind will fail to persuade of the accuracy of the Mosaic accounts of the Creation, Deluge, &c., and the attempt to force these upon them in opposition to their reason must be most disastrous: it would indeed be difficult to devise a process more intellectually demoralizing, more fatal to all our perceptions of literary sincerity and truthfulness, than this constant straining to "reconcile" the statements of the earlier Biblical Authors with the results of modern inquiry.

The last fault which a true student is likely to acquire is that of intellectual arrogance or dogmatism; the manifold difficulty of his pursuits, the elements of doubt which so frequently beset him, are far more likely to drive him, if he lose his balance at all, to the opposite extreme, to make him ready to deny the existence of any such thing as absolute truth, or to think it is at any rate far beyond our ken,—to drive

him into the adoption of the morbid creed—

Thinking is but an idle waste of thought,
And nought is everything and everything is nought.

This is a danger to be guarded against by one and all of us, but it is the result of the imperfection, not of the arrogance of intellect. There need be no presumption nor arrogance in the exercise of the intellect on religious matters; if these vices enter into the controversy at all, they exist only on the side of those who, thinking that they are in possession of absolute truth, call upon others to accept their system, whether their reason approves it or not. So long as we persist in regarding the intellectual powers as an enemy sent by the Devil, instead of a beneficent gift of God in the use of which He is honoured, so long shall we continue to witness that chronic conflict between orthodoxy and rationalism, that miserable divorce between faith and reason, which we now see to so great an extent around us. In the eloquent words of a living writer—"It is a faithless thought, that God has so constructed our nature, that its different parts are essentially in conflict: and the result of such a wilful sacrifice of the understanding might be a wretched, incurable, drivelling superstition, or even any amount of moral corruption, if the remonstrances of the understanding are thus put down by authority. It is not into modern English orthodoxy, nor into an

enlightened Romanism, that such a sacrifice might plunge us; but into whatever is ugliest in the darkest Romanism; for the check to black superstition being once broken in pieces, we are left at the mercy of accident, as to how far we may go.* To sacrifice the understanding will never produce true religion, but only fanaticism. * * * Practical Christianity was as nothing to the Deists of past centuries, because they took those divines at their word, who said that it all depended on historical faith,—which in fact is as needless, as it is confessedly insufficient. Let this truth be avowed, and a preacher, animated by the spirit of Christ and Paul, will have plenty to say, alike to the vulgar and to the philosophers, appreciable by the soul. Then he will be able to keep clear of historical and other extraneous inquiries, taking for his guide through entanglements this single principle: to render to the understanding the things that belong to the understanding, and to the soul the things of the

* Whither some of us are logically tending may be seen in an article in the *Friends' Examiner* for 4th Month, 1868, where the Author, W. S. LEAN, accepts the only alternative principle to individual illumination or perfect freedom of conscience, viz.:—that of the authority of a consensus of the Christian Church, upon which he says, "But indeed we need the mediate revelation, which in a reasonable sense may be called the consensus of the Church, for its own sake; *for here alone, in matters of theology, (and this has been the general testimony of men) do we find rest for the soles of our feet.*" This principle of authority is perfectly intelligible, consistent, and very plausible. From Augustine downwards, it has been maintained by minds of the highest calibre with

soul. Then he may speak with confidence of what he knows and feels; and call on his hearers of themselves to try and prove his words. Then the conversion of men to the love of God may take place by hundreds and thousands, as in some former instances. Then at length some hope may dawn that Mohammedans and Hindoos may be joined in one fold with us, under one Shepherd. * * * Then finally, the long schism of Jew and Gentile may be healed, and the hearts of the fathers may be turned to the children, ere God comes to smite us both with a curse."

Whilst these pages have been passing through the press my attention has been drawn to a circular issued from Manchester, respecting certain doctrinal opinions said to be held by some members of that Meeting, and indirectly calling for the interference of the Yearly Meeting to assist in dealing with the subject, intending we must suppose, either to put down with a strong hand the opinions in question, or perhaps to expel

almost an insuperable weight of argument. Moreover, from the beginning of the fourth century to the present time, it has been the only recognised principle of authority in the largest community of Christians in the world—the Church of Rome. But while we freely admit, that between this authority and that of reason and conscience in the Individual, there is no halting place,—since even the canon of Scripture itself rests upon the basis of a consensus of the Church declaring itself by means of an authoritative council,—we would ask the question, Are we, Friends, prepared to follow out this principle to its ultimate results? If we are, how can we any longer refuse to acknowledge the paramount claims of the Latin Church?

those holding them from the Society. The circular gives little precise information as to the nature of the points at issue, nor is it needful that they should be discussed here; it is sufficient to know that they identify those professing them with the "rational," rather than with the "evangelical" party, and that there is no charge against the "heterodox" members, of delinquency in Christian life or conduct; they are, on the contrary, stated to be "Friends of high character, of great natural ability, and considerable intellectual power, possessing many excellent gifts, both of head and of heart (and leading many followers after them)." That within a religious body which owes its peaceable existence to the recognition of the rights of conscience and which, for many a long year, fought a heroic battle in defence of those rights; which, moreover, has from the first persistently avoided requiring from its members a formal subscription to any articles of faith,—that within such a Society it should be thought necessary at this day to pursue the course apparently desired by the author of the Manchester circular, is, of itself, a more than sufficient justification of the present essay. The mere possibility of such a course being taken ought indeed to stimulate every one who respects his own conscience and who regards a living though, it may be, an erroneous belief better than a cold and lifeless orthodoxy to show plainly

on which side he stands. What could be more astounding than to find a large section of a Society which professes to be emancipated from the bondage of all formalism, thus distinctly refusing to accept as sufficient the simple and practical tests of discipleship which our Lord himself enunciated, ("By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another:" "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples") not perhaps ignoring these but adding thereto tests and formulæ of a widely different character? It will doubtless be said that the Society will be better without those who cannot conform to a newly imposed standard of orthodoxy, but no religious body can afford to lose men whose allegiance to Truth is beyond the love of sect or party, who conceding to others the same freedom of judgment which they claim for themselves, think nothing more natural than that there should be differences of opinion, but who, whether right or wrong, hold their religious beliefs as matters for which they are answerable to God alone.

The necessarily comprehensive character of any Church which can *now* embody or develop the religious sentiment of mankind, needs no advocacy with those who are truly awake to the signs of the times. But the following words of Bunsen, have weight, not only as the matured conviction of one of the most eminent men of his day, who was at the same time a

profound scholar and a deeply religious man, but because they represent views which are daily gaining ground in every section of the Christian Church. Writing to Lücke, Bunsen says, "Universal priesthood instead of the former exclusive order; works of love, instead of professions of faith; belief in God within us, (*i.e.* Christ) with such awe and humility, as can alone preserve Him to our souls;—that is the Religion and Church of the Future. *All besides must fall, and is already spiritually annihilated.* The Bible remains as the consecrated centre of the world's history." *

We of the Society of Friends enjoy perhaps more freedom of thought and action than the members of most other religious bodies, and our constitution admits more than others, of adaptation to the pressing need of the times, but if we would take any steps towards becoming the "Church of the Future"—a consummation perhaps not so utterly visionary or impracticable as may appear to some readers,—if indeed we would prevent fatal dissension and schism in our own ranks, we must be willing to grant unrestricted liberty of thought and opinion; we must even be ready to welcome amongst us those who may differ from us materially in matters of intellectual belief; we must in fact entirely abolish doctrinal standards of conformity,

* *Memoir of Baron Bunsen.* Vol. II. p. 224.

and be willing to join hands with all who feel our discipline and mode of worship suited to their needs. If we could show to the world a religious community built upon principles as broad as this and carrying into its daily life the Spirit of Christianity, we should, at the present crisis, do more than we have ever yet done to draw men together toward "one fold and one Shepherd," and to hasten the coming of that

Far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves.





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